RANCHO SANTA ANA BOTANIC GARDEN

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PLATANUS RACEMOSA
CALIFORNIA SYCAMORE

Prepared
by
RANCHO SANTA ANA BOTANIC GARDEN
of the
NATIVE PLANTS OF CALIFORNIA

Santa Ana Canyon
Orange County
California

No. 29 PLATANUS RACEMOSA May 3, 1940

CALIFORNIA SYCAMORE

Platanaceae Plane Tree Family

Deciduous tree reaching 100 ft. in height, often equally broad, but usually of irregular shape and with somewhat pendulous, tortuous branches. Main trunk often 4 ft. in diam., with rough fissured bark for a few ft., the remaining trunk and branches with silvery-gray, exfoliating bark. Leaves maple-like, 3 to 5 lobed, 8 to 12 in. across, light green, rusty pubescent on both surfaces in early spring, later becoming dark green and nearly glabrous. Stipules sheathing, 1 to 2 in. broad, several toothed. Flowers monoecious (staminate and pistillate separate on same tree), borne in 3 to 7 densely aggregated heads on a peduncle several in. long, appearing in March with the leaves. Staminate heads green, 3/8 in. broad, falling apart as pollen is shed. Pistillate heads reddish, somewhat larger, each flower with several carpels from which develop the prismatic achenes, which form a dense, hardened head about $\frac{3}{4}$ in. broad, these ripen in late fall but often hang on the trees until spring.

The word Platanus is of ancient Greek origin from the root word for broad (in reference to the plates of exfoliating bark). About 6 species of Platanus occur in North America, S.E. Europe and Asia. Three are native to the United States. These few species comprise the Platanaceae, the flower structure of which is so peculiar that botanists have long been puzzled as to relationships of the family to others, but have generally considered it as close to the Rose Family.

The California Sycamore, Platanus racemosa (species name in reference to the racemose inflorescence), was named in 1842 by Thos. Nuttall, American botanist, who obtained the original specimens at Santa Barbara. Two years later Bentham, an English botanist, also received specimens from California and proposed the name Platanus californica, but the former name has priority.

Distribution of the California Sycamore is from near the head of the Sacramento Valley to San Diego Co. and Baja Calif. It is found along nearly every watercourse of the coastal section of Central and Southern California, ascending to about 4000 ft. It is so abundant that much of the beauty and charm of the California landscape is due to its presence. Spanish-Californians called this tree Aliso and numerous canyons in which it grows bear this name.

Sections of logs of California Sycamore served as wheels for

ox-carts of the Spanish-Californians, who no doubt in turn used the same carts to haul sycamore firewood for their fireplaces. Today these trees furnish a limited amount of firewood and are occasionally used for furniture, but in most areas they are too highly prized as ornamentals to be cut. Many beautiful home-sites and parks in California center around native stands of California Sycamores.

The California Sycamore is one of the few trees that is truly beautiful during its dormant period, for after the leaves are shed in the late fall the massive framework of silvery-gray trunks is revealed. In March, but varying with the seasons, the buds open and the leaves and flowers gradually transform the entire tree into a pale green canopy and serve to announce that spring has again come to California.

For horticultural usage California Sycamores lend themselves to many situations. They have been favorite garden shade trees around which patios and outdoor living rooms have centered. They are particularly effective when planted in groups and have been thus used in broad parkways and along roadsides. Bottoms of small ravines and canyons are ideal spots. They have been widely planted in lawns but generally receive too much water, especially in heavy soil, and do not thrive so well as in areas where the drainage is better. California Sycamores are untidy trees for leaves are dropped throughout the late summer and fall and even occasionally some remain until spring. During some wet seasons the new leaves and twigs are attacked by a fungus (Gnomonia veneta) which kills most of the new growth, giving the trees the appearance of having been frosted. This is not serious and new growth takes place promptly with the new leaves generally less numerous but larger. Spraying the trees with Bordeaux mixture (5-5-30) just as the buds open is a suggested remedy. It is probable that much of the crooked branching habit of these trees is the result of repeated attacks of this fungus.

Field grown trees of the California Sycamore are available from nurseries and should be set out in January or February. Propagation is by hardwood cuttings and by seeds. In both instances the results are satisfactory and trees of 8 to 15 ft. can be produced in two growing seasons, but the seedling trees appear to be superior in that the roots and tops are better developed.

RANCHO SANTA ANA BOTANIC GARDEN

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In Memory of John W. Bixby

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Purpose: A scientific institution devoted to the growth and study of the native plants of California for their botanical, horticultural and popular features.

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